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January 6th: Genesis 6 & Matthew 2:1-12

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Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Genesis chapter 6. When man began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive, and they took as their wives any they chose. Then the Lord said, My spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for he is flesh, his days shall be one hundred and twenty years. The Nephilim were on the land in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them.

These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown. The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord regretted that he made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

So the Lord said, But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord. These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation.

Noah walked with God. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. Now the

earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence.

And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. And God said to Noah, This is how you are to make it. The length of the ark, 300 cubits.

Its breadth, 50 cubits. And its height, 30 cubits. Make a roof for the ark and finish it to a cubit above, and set the door of the ark in its side.

Make it with lower, second and third decks. For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die.

But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female.

Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds. Of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every sort shall come into you to keep them alive. Also take with you every sort of food that is eaten, and store it up.

It shall serve as food for you and for them. Noah did this. He did all that God commanded him.

Verse 1 of chapter 6 concerning the multiplication of man connects what has gone before with the event of the flood that follows. However, while the genealogy of chapter 5 moves step by step towards the climax of the 10th generation, this introduction highlights the multiplication that has occurred through the generations, not just the progression. And while chapter 5 focused on the sons and the movement from father to son, verse 1 of chapter 6 shifts attention to the daughters.

With the sons comes an emphasis upon the succession of rule and name. With the daughters an emphasis upon the proliferation and the life of humanity. We should note also here that there is an echo of the fall.

The sons of God see that the daughters of man are good, and they take them, much as Eve took the fruit in the garden. Now the big question many people have here is who are the sons of God? And the oldest readings can often relate this to angelic beings or members of the divine council. So God exists enthroned above the heavens, and there are created beings that surround him.

The angels and then of various classes, these divine beings. These are the gods of the nations, the rulers, who are created beings, but nonetheless above humanity in various

ways. These beings are referred to as the sons of God elsewhere in scripture in places like the book of Job, in places like Psalm 89, and in parts of Deuteronomy.

It's also within ancient Near Eastern mythology that there is this council of the gods. Now that's been demythologised to a certain extent and placed within a monotheistic framework within scripture. But there are significant commonalities here.

Elsewhere in Genesis, angels also seem to appear in human bodily forms. They seem to be capable of regular human bodily actions such as eating. And so some have suggested that these are angelic beings having physical relations with human women.

There are a number of questions and problems with this, but also some advantages to this thesis. First of all, why are human beings punished for what seems to be the sin of angels? That's one of the questions that has arisen for many critics of this position. This reading also tends to relate it to wider ancient mythology of sexual relations between humanity and the gods, and the superhuman heroes that arose from such unions.

There's a broader theme that goes throughout the book of Genesis that this might fit into. It's a broader theme of attempts to gain forbidden status. So in the case of the Garden of Eden, the man and the woman sought to become like one of the gods.

The temptation of the serpent, who presumably was one of the gods himself, offered them the possibility of gaining this status. This status of rule and authority in the world. Perhaps what we're seeing here is a development of the temptation and the ploy of the serpent in the garden to get humanity to crave this forbidden status and to align themselves with him and his fallen angels to try and achieve it.

So with sexual consort between human women and fallen angels, there is the hope that they will gain some higher status and power within the world. We can see a further example of this at the Tower of Babel, where humanity seeks to gain authority to build a tower that rises to heaven so that they will not be scattered and so that they will have some of the authority of the gods. Another interesting thing to bear in mind here is the fact that the angels in scripture seem to be exclusively male and seem to be particularly interested in women.

The angels as depicted in scripture are comparable to a military company or a band of priests. They are a band of sons and brothers. They're not a race like humanity.

Humanity is a bride and on account of women has a glory of its own that angels lack. Human women represent the potential of humanity to be elevated above the angels and for this reason might spark angelic jealousy and pride. It might be one of the reasons why the angels specifically target human women because women are the ones that represent the potential of humanity to be exalted above the angels, to be the bride.

In 1 Corinthians 11 verse 10, we are told that women have to dress in a particular

modest manner on account of the angels and some such as Tertullian have related that to this particular reading of Genesis. There's also the fact that within apocryphal literature dating back maybe even to the 3rd and 4th centuries BC such as the book of Enoch, there are already developed stories of these events relating them to angelic watchers. These figures torch humanity, technology, warfare, cosmetics, astrology, witchcraft and other such arts and they determine to take human wives to bear children for themselves as part of their own rebellion.

And they become the giants of the Nephilim. And this apocryphal literature seems to be referenced in the New Testament in places such as 2 Peter 2 verses 4-5, the book of Jude verse 6 and verses 14-15. And as I've mentioned in the case of Tertullian and elsewhere, we see this sort of understanding of the text referenced very early in the history of the church.

And it seems that this reading certainly has a strong pedigree but yet it's been strongly challenged by many. It's important to notice that behind this challenge to the angelic sons of God reading are often deeper concerns about the interpretation of scripture. In particular, when the reading of obscure texts is made to hinge upon details from, for instance, ancient Near Eastern mythology and apocryphal literature, many people get understandably concerned.

This suggests the existence of a sort of penumbral realm of partial revelation in myth and non-scriptural prophecy which extends beyond the explicit word of scripture. And the more that we are made to depend upon this, the more biblical revelation can become eroded by myths, fables and speculation. Also, one not uncommonly encounters people who entertain such myths drifting away from focus upon the revealed things of God into speculative and fantastical fables.

So one moment they're talking about Genesis 6 and the next they have a unified theory of ancient mythological heroes, modern UFO sightings and scripture that threatens to displace God's clear revealed word from its centrality. However, on the other hand, the claim that scripture is hermetically sealed off from such realms of discourse is difficult to sustain at various points in the text, such as in the places I mentioned in 2 Peter and the book of Jude. These seem to reference apocryphal literature and it might be worth bearing in mind that while it references such apocryphal literature, scripture shows a certain reservation about this mythological aspect.

While it comes into view at certain points, it is in shadow, it's not focused upon and likewise for us it should not become the focus of our attention, although it is worth paying attention to. There seems to be a large amount of stuff in scripture that is just mysterious and not explained within the text itself, much less than some presume, those who will take the more mythological perspective, can often overestimate the amount that needs to be explained by sources outside of the text. But there is much more than

certain biblicists might like to believe.

There are certain things that cannot easily be explained from within the text. So let's take note of some of the issues here. If we're going to solve a question like this, or at least break it down to size, we need to recognise some of the problems and the issues that are at play.

So the first thing to notice is the existence of early myths elaborating on the significance of these events and possibly validating allusions to these in the New Testament. The other thing to notice is the use of the terminology of sons of God to refer to angels on various other occasions in scripture. It's not used in the same way to refer to the generation of the righteous, for instance.

The implication that the Nephilim were the result of the sexual union between the sons of God and daughters of man is a fairly natural reading of this passage. And why would such a union, why would a union between two sets of human beings produce giants and mighty men? That's another question to answer. The use of the word Adam or man in contrasting ways in verse 1 and 2 is also important.

If the reading that many have presented in a more conservative context, that one is the generation of the righteous and the other generation of the wicked, you have man multiplying. And then you have the reference to the daughters of man. But man used there in that particular reading is a particular group of man.

It's not mankind in general and it's strange that you'd have that shift between those two senses of the term. On the surface of things, there seems to be a contrast between a group of persons associated with the gods and a group of women associated with humanity. Some opponents of the angelic sons of God reading have brought forward the claim that angels do not marry according to Jesus' teaching.

And this certainly seems to be true of the righteous angels. Angels do not have relations among themselves. They are a host, not a race.

However, angels can come in a bodily form and those bodies can seem to perform usual functions. And would it be possible for such an angel in such a body to have relations with human beings? It does not seem to be something that we can simply rule out as a possibility. Also, we have angelic or demonic possession of human bodies, which would present other possibilities.

Genesis also, I think this is one of the strongest arguments against the angelic sons of God reading. Genesis seems to have an anti-mythological impulse and such a reading seems to open the door, at least by a crack, to all sorts of mythology. And so a number of those arguing against the angelic sons of God reading point to this danger.

And the impulse of Genesis is to attack these mythologies and place things within a

monotheistic and non-mythological framework. A common Christian and Jewish reading then is that the sons of God are the covenant line of Seth and the daughters of men are women of the line of Cain. The problem then is intermarriage between the line of the righteous and the line of the wicked.

Now, this might be reading the concept of the covenant back into a situation where it does not appropriately belong. And I'm unpersuaded by this reading myself. Other readings have tried to take on board the strength of the angelic sons of God reading and bring different things to bear upon the question.

So, for instance, people like Meredith Klein have argued that the sons of God are dynastic rulers and taking of the daughters of men, whichever they choose, is the reference to indiscriminate marriage and polygamy like Lamech and his wives. The sons of God or the sons of the gods, it's language that can be used of kings. And we see that sort of language used in ancient Near Eastern mythology of sacral kingship.

The king can be understood as the son of the gods or goddesses. And the high priestesses would be seen as spouses of the deity and would themselves be bound up with the royal dynastic cult. And so Genesis chapter 6 might be referring to this cultic myth rather than advocating an actual myth.

Of course, behind the cultic myth was the actual worship of fallen angels and ritual sonship of them. Chris Coe has made a strong argument for this particular reading, arguing that the ritual enacting of sexual congress with the gods is involved here. But it's a ritual inaction, not an actual physical sexual relation with the gods.

The Nephilim are described as mighty men. Later in chapter 10, verse 8, Nimrod is described in similar language. We're told that God's spirit will not strive, protect or remain with man forever.

It's not entirely clear what that word should be translated as. We've already encountered the spirit hovering over the creation in the beginning in chapter 1, verse 2. It might also be a reference to the breath that is breathed into man. That God is going to remove the breath from everything that breathes.

And there's a spirit and flesh opposition here. Flesh stands for humanity and its weakness and frailty and also for animal life. Flesh must be cut off.

Man is evil completely, exclusively and continually. Every part of man's life is infected and corrupted by sin. And what we're seeing in part here is the spreading out of sin.

In the Garden of Eden, we saw that first blot of sin in the Garden Realm. And then it spreads out to the land with the killing of Abel by Cain. And now it's spread out even further.

And we're seeing a gradual progression also from the relationship between man and God. The relationship between brother and brother with Cain and Abel. And now the relationship between husband and wife and also the angels coming into the picture, perhaps.

This is a breakdown of the whole cosmic order. And the whole creation is in this broader rebellion. And the logic of sin is being ever more completely worked out.

In the naming of the child Noah in the previous chapter, there's an anticipation that he will bring an alteration in humanity's relationship with the earth. Noah is named Noah because he will bring comfort. Yet there seems to be a wordplay connecting this with God's regret in this chapter.

That God's regret is a play on the name for Noah. God declares a universal intention. But immediately we read of an exception to it, Noah.

While the rest of human flesh and flesh in general is going to be wiped out, Noah finds grace in God's eyes. And grace here is important. This is not fundamentally grounded upon anything that Noah has done that Noah merits.

But his receipt of grace from God. Noah heads a new generation section here as well. This is a story that is spreading out from Noah's life and what he stands for.

He's told to build an ark. The ark has three stories, as does the world, the heavens, the earth, and the waters under the earth. Within the ark, he's supposed to have male and female of all creatures.

The dimensions of the ark are interesting too. It's worth reflecting upon the connections between them and the dimensions of the tabernacle and its courtyard. Or the dimensions of the temple.

We should relate these things together. Also, some of the key numbers of the flood narrative, such as the number 150. Or the number of Noah's age.

The flood occurs in Noah's 600th year. And after that, he lives for 300 years and 50 years. If you think about 350, those are the dimensions of the ark.

And so Noah himself is an ark. A human ark that bears humanity in himself. The instructions to build the ark have all sorts of curious details.

Concerning the roof or skylight. The division of the ark into rooms or nests. And the wood from which it should be made.

There are other details that are omitted. So one of the questions I would encourage you to think about are what are the significance of some of these details? How can comparing these details with the story of other constructions that human beings are

called to make shed light upon both? Matthew 2 verses 1-12. Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled. And all Jerusalem with him. And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet. And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah. For from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search diligently for the child. And when you have found him, bring me word that I too may come and worship him.

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them, until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Today is the Feast of Epiphany, so we'll be taking a break from studying John's Gospel to look at Matthew chapter 2, verses 1 to 12 and the visit of the kings. This is a celebration of Jesus' revelation of his glory to the Gentiles. And themes of kingship are prominent throughout the chapter.

Stars in heaven, the Magi coming from the east, Herod the king in Jerusalem. We can ask questions about what the star was. Many different suggestions have been presented.

Maybe it's a comet, maybe it's a planetary conjunction, maybe it's a supernova or an ova. And others have suggested that it's the Shekinah Glory. That Shekinah Glory reading is perhaps one with particular interest as we see the Magi led through the wilderness.

They are led by some divine light to the location where God's presence is found. And then that light rests upon the location of Christ. Maybe this is a reference to the Shekinah Glory that eventually settled on the tabernacle in the temple.

They're led through the wilderness like Israel was led through the wilderness. There's an inverted exodus here. Whereas you have Magi from the east, Gentiles being led through the wilderness.

You have a court and a king that are trying to kill baby boys later on. This is a pharaoh-like situation. But yet Herod is the king of the Jews.

Here we have a contrast, an inversion. The Magi are magicians. The magicians were the opponents of Moses and Aaron.

But now they are the ones that are coming to meet the newborn king. Magi and Daniel might be an association. These are the court magicians that came under Daniel's rule and guidance.

And so perhaps through Daniel and his influence came to an understanding of the truth of the God of Israel. And maybe had through that an understanding of the sign that the heavenly light that they saw represented. The Magi might also make us think of the Queen of Sheba.

The Queen of Sheba came from afar to see Solomon's glory and to bring tribute and gifts to him. And there's a greater than Solomon here. One to whom the kings of the east come to hear his wisdom, to bring him gifts and tribute.

In the Old Testament we see the king represented as one who will receive these gifts from foreign visitors. In the book of Psalms we have, May he have dominion from sea to sea and from river to the ends of the earth. May desert tribes bow down before him and his enemies lick the dust.

May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute. May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him.

All nations serve him. In Psalm 72. In Isaiah chapter 60.

Arise shine for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples. But the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will be seen upon you.

And nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around and see they all gather together they come to you. Your son shall come from afar and your daughter shall be carried on the hip.

Then you shall see and be radiant. Your heart shall thrill and exult. Because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you.

The wealth of the nation shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you. The young camels of Midian and Ephah.

All those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense. And shall bring good news the praises of the Lord.

All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you. The rams of Nebioth shall minister to you. They shall come up with acceptance on my altar.

And I will beautify my beautiful house. So here we see the riches of the nations coming to the new born Christ. He is the one who will be the true king of the Jews.

The one who will displace Herod and all other false leaders. And we are reminded here in the prophecy of Micah and a reference back to 2 Samuel 5 verse 2. That he is the true David. The one who will shepherd Israel.

The one who will rise up from Bethlehem and he will lead his people. The gifts of the Magi present Jesus as the king. But also Jesus as the true bridegroom.

He is given gifts that mark out who he is. That declare his true identity. Some questions to think about.

In 1 Kings chapter 14 we read of the character of Hadad the Edomite. How might he shed light upon the contrast and the conflict between Herod and Jesus? Another question. What light might the story of Balaam and Balak in the book of Numbers shed upon this particular passage?